



Natality, the Past, and the Pearl Diver: Exploring Hannah Arendt's Educational Teaching.

Frank Giuseffi, William Woods University

Abstract

The penetrating philosophical and political writings of Hannah Arendt has offered human-kind provocative and insightful analysis on political action, moral behavior, and human freedom. All the more arresting, are Arendt's writings on education, fully expressed in her work, "Crisis in Education." This article investigates Arendt's understanding of the crisis and how natality, authority, and conserving what Arendt terms the "newcomer's" revolutionary action through a nuanced view of the past, addresses that crisis. This article also considers a more comprehensive understanding of the newcomer's revolutionary activity during educational experiences by analyzing Arendt's views on tradition and the "pearl diver" metaphor described in her essay on Walter Benjamin. In exploring the impact Arendt's thinking may have on education, educationists can have new hope in their quest for further theoretical and philosophical underpinnings for teaching and learning and enhance the vibrancy and meaningfulness of philosophy of education.

Keywords: *natality, pearl diver, newcomer, authority, tradition, fragmented historiography*

Although not strictly considered a philosopher of education, Hannah Arendt's exhaustive work on political life and keen observations on the American democratic experience gave rise to a unique understanding of education elucidated in her chapter essay, "The Crisis in Education" (hereafter *CE*) published in *Between Past and Future* (1961). While the main crisis is the dubious influence authority has in the modern world and specifically in education, Arendt offers readers several other ruminations about education worth noting. In this article, I first offer a brief description of Hannah Arendt's life and work. Second, I present the major themes of Arendt's teaching on education, those being natality, the teacher's authority, and preserving, what Arendt calls the "newcomer's" revolutionary or creative activity through the past. I then offer a fuller understanding of Arendt's ideas about the creative aspects of students' learning by drawing from her views on tradition and her unique use of the "pearl diver" metaphor. In investigating these central ideas, an appreciation and understanding can be achieved of Arendt's thinking on education, to include the challenges and opportunities these ideas pose for education today.

The Life and Work of Hannah Arendt

Hannah Arendt was born in 1906 in Hanover, Germany. Arendt studied classics, theology, and philosophy at the University of Berlin and attended graduate school at the University of Marburg under the noted philosopher, Martin Heidegger. As a doctoral student in Heidelberg, Arendt

completed her dissertation on St. Augustine's idea of love under the existentialist philosopher, Karl Jaspers.¹ Arendt's initial interest and ultimate life's work on the political, however, did not emerge until the rise of Hitler² and then fully realized with the burning of the Reichstag in 1933.³ With these tragic events, Arendt, along with many other German Jewish intellectuals at the time, emigrated to the United States.⁴ As an observer and participant in human affairs, Arendt worked in many diverse roles: newspaper writer, research manager, and senior editor. Arendt eventually took a position as a professor at the New School for Social Research until her death in 1975.⁵ Arendt's various intellectual pursuits resulted in several acclaimed books such as *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), *Men in Dark Times* (1955), *The Human Condition* (1958), *Between Past and Future* (1961), *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), and *The Life of the Mind* (1978) published posthumously.⁶

Philosophical Influences

Arendt is considered one of the most impactful political theorists of the twentieth century.⁷ Arendt's political theories were rooted in pre-Greek philosophy, the ideas of Plato and Aristotle, and Roman History. Arendt came to believe the thoughts of Plato and Aristotle were ultimately detrimental to what she termed the *vita activa*—the active life based on labor, work, and action.⁸ Political life was not a contemplative or philosophical activity as Plato's and Aristotle's philosophies suggested. Instead, pre-Greek philosophy reflected in the figures of Homer, Sophocles, and Thucydides, showed a truer picture of the human person, manifested in freedom and the experience "of not being bound to or by anything, of initiating utterly new things for which no patterns exist."⁹ When exploring the American Founding, Arendt concluded that the founders looked to the Greek polis and the Roman *res publica* for guidance.¹⁰

Arendt was also influenced by her former teacher, Martin Heidegger. It cannot be overstated the admiration Arendt had for Heidegger. In her writings about the gifted teacher, Arendt observes: "Thinking has come to life again; the cultural treasures of the past, believed to be dead,

1. Dana R. Villa. "Chronology," ed. Dana R. Villa (Cambridge: The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt, 2000), xiii.

2. Maurizio Passerin d'Entreves, "Hannah Arendt" in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford: Stanford University, 2019), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/arendt/>

3. Grace Lau and Kwok Keung Ho, "Hannah Arendt's 'The Human Condition' in the Realm of Early Childhood Education: Perceptions and Reality," *International Journal of Progressive Education* 14, no. 2 (2018): 13-28. DOI: 10.29329/ijpe.2018.139.2

4. Peter Graf Kielmansegg, "Introduction," in Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss: German Emigres and American Political Thought after World War II, eds. Peter Graf Kielmansegg and Elisabeth Glaser-Schmidt (Washington, D.C.: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1.

5. Dana R. Villa. "Chronology," ed. Dana R. Villa (Cambridge: The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt, 2000), xv-xvi.

6. Maurizio Passerin d'Entreves, "Hannah Arendt" in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford: Stanford University, 2019), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/arendt/>

7. Dana R. Villa. "Introduction: The Development of Arendt's Political Thought," ed. Dana R. Villa (Cambridge: Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt, 2000), 1.

8. Carrie Rogers, "Beginning and Becoming: Hannah Arendt's Theory of Action and Action Research in Education" *inquiry in education* 5, no.1 (2014): 1-10, <http://digitalcommons.nl.edu/ie/vol5/iss1/2>

9. Jerome Kohn, introduction to *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006), ix

10. Ernst Vollrath, "Hannah Arendt Views the United States," eds. Peter Graf Kielmansegg, Horst Mewes, & Elisabeth Glaser-Schmidt (Cambridge: Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss: German Emigres and American Political Thought after World War II, 1997). 52.

are being made to speak, in the course of which it turns out that they propose things altogether different from the familiar, worn-out trivialities they had been presumed to say. There exists a teacher; one can perhaps learn to think.”¹¹ This curious wording offers an early glimpse of Arendt’s later perspective of recognizing past events as treasures that speak to the issues of the present.

Arendt initially believed Heidegger’s major philosophical principle of facticity (*Faktizität*), or “being-in-the-world” (*Dasein*), and explorations on the activity of thinking, cleared a path for a new philosophy that finally responded to the existential experiences of human beings.¹² Heidegger’s exploration of *Dasein* emerged out of his continual quest to determine what was meant by *Being*. According to Heidegger, the ancient Greeks’ awe and wonder about Being was obscured by the historical development of Western philosophy.¹³ Heidegger believed Western philosophy formulated ontological notions of Being as at first, a universal concept; second, something indescribable; and third, as self-evident.¹⁴ Considered to be incorrect ways of defining Being, Heidegger posits that the quest for what we mean by Being must be phenomenological, to wit, reality is disclosed without the assistance of any theory, frame of reference, or elucidation.¹⁵ This phenomenological approach begins with a thing overcoming its “hiddenness” through “un-concealment.” The individual’s first realization about themselves, is that they are there. Heidegger terms this first un-concealment as “there-being” or *Da-sein*.¹⁶ *Da-sein* traditionally means existence; however, in following Darwin’s use of existence as a “struggle for life,” Heidegger sees *Da-sein* as a kind of existence that is continually involved in an understanding of its own Being.¹⁷ As being different from other beings, *Da-sein* is the being that confronts its own existence.¹⁸ The decisive way toward authenticity is to break out of facticity or thrownness—the everydayness of being - and come to one’s senses and one’s existence. This must include the possibility of death – “being-unto-death.”¹⁹ For Heidegger, however, the “existential” of death points to what he terms “relating-oneself-to-oneself” thereby, ignoring any interaction with others. One is merely thrown in the world and loses themselves in it.²⁰

Whereas Heidegger wants us to break out of the everydayness of life so as not to lose oneself, Arendt thinks the everydayness or thrownness of *Da-sein* is what it precisely means to be human. Moreover, Arendt’s concept of natality replaces *Da-sein*’s final completeness in “being-unto-death.”²¹ Hence, Arendt’s concept of natality becomes an inverted precept of Heidegger’s “being-unto-death.” Instead of “being-unto-death” as the fundamental quality of human existence, Arendt proposes birth as the starting point for encounters and reflections on the world.²² This was

11. Mark Lilla, *The Reckless Mind: Intellectuals in Politics* (New York Review of Book, 2016), 12.

12. Jerome Kohn, “The World of Hannah Arendt,” Hannah Arendt Papers Online, Library of Congress, 2001, <https://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/0103/arendt.html>.

13. David R. Cerbone, *Heidegger: A Guide for the Perplexed*. (New York: Continuum, 2008), 3.

14. Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. David F. Krell. (San Francisco: Harper Collins 1993. 42-44.

15. Albert B. Hakim, *Historical Introduction to Philosophy*. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company), 1992. 758.

16. Hakim, 758.

17. Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 46.

18. Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei, “Death and Authenticity: Reflections on Heidegger, Rilke, Blanchot” *Existenz* 9, no 1 (2014): 53-62, <http://www.existenz.us>

19. Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 105.

20. Benhabib. 107.

21. *Ibid.*, 107.

22. *Ibid.*, xiv.

fully expressed in the notion of natality where the individual enters the world as a newcomer.²³ The positive impact natality has to the lives of humans and the cosmic order is clear:

The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, “natural” ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted. It is, in other words, the birth of new [people] and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born. Only the full experience of this capacity can bestow upon human affairs faith and hope.²⁴

By emphasizing life and natality (as will be underscored in *CE*), as opposed to death and impermanence, political activity was seen as an optimistic endeavor where human engagement was effectuated.²⁵ Moreover, this engagement with the world is authentic since human beings “share with others like themselves and with whom they are in constant communication and to whom they appear through speech and action.”²⁶ Arendt’s new philosophical discovery could not include Heidegger’s remote and inaccessible philosophy; it could not address the issues that plagued the world.²⁷ As will be explicated in *CE*, natality will play a central role in the teaching and learning that must take place to address the challenges of the modern world and plan for a better future.

Another person who added to the development of Arendt’s intellectual life was Karl Jaspers. Jaspers taught psychology at Freiburg and received notoriety for his work, *Psychology of Worldviews*.²⁸ Interestingly, as Arendt’s dissertation advisor, Jaspers would analyze Arendt’s work by referring to her discoveries as “pearls.” Indeed, in commenting on Arendt’s dissertation, Jaspers noticed “the pearls” she had grasped in the otherwise “rhetorical and preacherly” writings of Augustine.²⁹ The professional relationship of advisor to student eventually grew into a friendship based on a mutual respect for dialogue and an unremitting desire to ponder the world of ideas and human events.³⁰ As an influencer on her work, Jaspers enhanced in Arendt the ability to think trans-historically, that is to say, to think in the present with past thinkers outside the realm of tradition and history.³¹

Crisis in Education

Arendt’s essay “Crisis in Education,” first written in 1954 in *Partisan Review*, was part of a larger work entitled *Between Past and Future*, (1961). In the several essays of the latter work,

23. Wolfhart Totsching, “Arendt’s Notion of Natality: An Attempt at Clarification,” *Ideas y Valores* 66, no. 165 (2007) 327-346, <http://dx.doi.org/10.15446/ideasyvalores.v66n165.55202>

24. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 247.

25. Patrick Hayden, “Illuminating Hannah Arendt,” ed. Patrick Hayden, (New York: Hannah Arendt: Key Concepts, 2014). 15

26. Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), xiv.

27. Jerome Kohn, “The World of Hannah Arendt” Hannah Arendt Papers Online, Library of Congress, 2001, <https://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/0103/arendt.html>.

28. Mark Lilla, *The Reckless Mind: Intellectuals in Politics*. (New York: New York Review of Books, 2001).

29. M.T. Korsgaard, “Pearl diving and the Exemplary Way: Educational Notetaking and Taking note in Education,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, (2020): 4, <http://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1743272>

30. Jon Nixon, *Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Friendship*. (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), xi.

31. Jerome Kohn, *The World of Hannah Arendt*, Hannah Arendt Papers Online, Library of Congress, 2001, <https://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/0103/arendt.html>.

Arendt claims tradition has been shattered, and thereby, its authority or power will never be recovered.³² The implications for such a claim are various and difficult to fully understand.³³ Yet, the theme of tradition is quite pronounced in *CE* and gives meaning to the other aspects of education that Arendt sees as critical: authority, the role of the school, and understanding the past as separate from tradition.

Arendt argues the crisis in education goes beyond merely “Why Johnny can’t read,”³⁴ and that the wide-ranging challenges in education are not merely confined to America.³⁵ As an observer of political history and affairs, Arendt is aware that critical and dynamic events are not specific to any one country. In other words, the issues that emerged in the United States concerning education could find their way to other countries. Yet, Arendt claims the most extreme form of a crisis in education may well reside in America. The acceptance and influx of immigrants throughout the history of America only strengthened by its asseveration: *Novus Ordo Seclorum*—New World Order, resulted in the desire for what was new in all facets of American life.³⁶ However, this desire for what was new did not arise as a concept or political movement until the eighteenth century with Rousseau, whose ideas resulted in education turning into “an instrument of politics, and political activity itself was conceived as a form of education.”³⁷ But for Arendt the marriage of politics and education has disastrous effects. Arendt believes education as a vehicle to propagate a regime reflects the activity of both tyrannical and utopian governments. According to Arendt, one who wishes to “educate” in the political realm is actually trying to coerce without force. It is for this reason Arendt makes the bold claim: “Education can play no part in politics, because in politics we always have to deal with those who are already educated.”³⁸ Those who are already educated are adults who wish to advance their political agendas to others. Arendt believes newcomers (students) would be coerced in learning the dictates of the regime. Furthermore, the attempt to present a new utopian world to newcomers actually precludes them from participating in future political activities as adults. Arendt reasons that the so-called new political order adults would propose would be already old to newcomers.³⁹ As Arendt writes, “It is in the very nature of the human condition that each new generation grows into an old world.”⁴⁰ If adults present to newcomers the ideas of new regime, that is to say, the old world, then you rob the young of their own ability to create something new.⁴¹

However true this might be, Arendt suggests the political temper of America can be too strong a force to eradicate. The notion of equality in America has, according to Arendt, intensified the crisis in education. The attempt to eliminate differences between, for instance, young and old or adults and children can have negative consequences to schooling, especially with the teacher’s authority⁴²

But these developments in education were based on three assumptions that emerged in modern society: the disruption of the natural experiences between adults and children due to the

32. Jerome Kohn, introduction to *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006), vii.

33. *Ibid.*, vii.

34. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006), 171.

35. *Ibid.*, 173.

36. *Ibid.*, 173.

37. *Ibid.*, 173.

38. *Ibid.*, 173.

39. *Ibid.*, 173.

40. *Ibid.*, 174.

41. *Ibid.*, 174.

42. *Ibid.*, 176-177.

creation of a “child’s world;” the impact of pragmatism and modern psychology on pedagogy; and the focus on skills-based learning as opposed to the teaching of what was viewed as “dead knowledge.”⁴³ While these three assumptions highlighted the darker side of education, they did not prevent Arendt from simultaneously positing that education was the most fundamental activity of civilization, an activity that “never remains as it is but continuously renews itself through birth, through the arrival of new human beings.”⁴⁴ This seemingly obvious yet profound observation about the realities of birth and the child as a newcomer underlies Arendt’s hope for education.

According to Arendt, parents have introduced their children to the world. The child, as a new human being or newcomer, must be protected from the world; that protection traditionally resides in the family. Parents and children leave the world for the safety of private life against the public world⁴⁵ The child, in the process of developing, needs shelter and protection. The attempt, according to Arendt, to create an artificial child’s world that generates a particular public life exposes children too soon to the public world and “destroys the necessary conditions for vital development and growth.”⁴⁶ In the education realm, the young person’s first introduction to the world is at school. Although Arendt believes the school should not create an imaginary world solely for children, the school should also not attempt to mimic the world or represent itself as the world.⁴⁷ Interestingly, the school then is the nexus between the family (private realm) and the world (public realm). The school becomes the bridge between the child’s private life within the family and the public realm of the world.⁴⁸ The teacher, as an authority figure, presents the world to the child. Consequently, the teacher must take responsibility for the world, specifically being able to instruct students about the world. After the harsh realities of totalitarianism, the concept of authority in the political realm and more generally in public life, either has no role or a disputed one. This, however, cannot be the case for education; authority must exist and be maintained since the teacher is responsible for the instruction of the world to students. However, Arendt sees the risk in the public realm’s disrespect for authority seeping into the private realm of the family and school. This becomes apparent as the forces of mass society deadens the modern person’s responsibility for the world that is necessary for the rearing of their children.⁴⁹ A great chasm exists between Arendt’s jarring observation and the original spirit she ascertains in America, one that is shaped by the New World Order and the animated spirit of revolution and newness it fosters. While America, broadly speaking, had this revolutionary spirit, it took a conservative stance in regard to education.⁵⁰ To Arendt, education’s role is to “cherish and protect something—the child against the world, the world against the child, the new against the old, the old against the new.”⁵¹ This, however, cannot be the stance in the political realm. According to Arendt, conserving the political defends and safeguards the status quo. For there to be improvement in the world, we must heed the words of Hamlet who recognized a distorted world, but also understood the opportunity to, as he states “set it right.” Considering this, teachers must educate so their students can set the world right.⁵² The spaces and paths for children to be revolutionary are available if the teacher conserves the child’s

43. *Ibid.*, 179.

44. *Ibid.*, 182.

45. *Ibid.*, 183.

46. *Ibid.*, 183.

47. *Ibid.*, 185.

48. *Ibid.*, 185.

49. *Ibid.*, 188.

50. *Ibid.*, 188.

51. *Ibid.*, 188.

52. *Ibid.*, 189.

newness: “Exactly for the sake of what is new and revolutionary in every child, education must be conservative; it must preserve the newness and introduce it as a new thing into an old world.”⁵³ Put another way, education’s conservatism and the child’s newness work together to produce something revolutionary and that goes beyond learning the past chronologically or based on tradition.

While there is always newness in teaching and learning, education qua education must continually return to the past. Indeed, educators, according to Arendt, must facilitate educational experiences that are based on both what has gone before the present and what is yet to come; hence, there must be a great respect for the past. The conscious recognition of such a reality was not considered during the historical development of Roman-Christian civilizations before the Renaissance; the past and tradition were already associated with conceptual understandings that peoples of these civilizations had of the world. But to Arendt, educators are not in that position today. Speaking of education, Arendt claims, “by its very nature it cannot forego either authority or tradition, and yet must proceed in a world that is neither structured by authority nor held together by tradition.”⁵⁴

This paradoxical predicament, that centers in on the actual crisis in education, leads Arendt to argue that all adults, not just those in education, must agree to offer our children the authority and respect for the past conducive to an educational upbringing separate and different from the adult world. This desire to protect children from the adult, public, and political worlds originate from love. For Arendt, education hinges on the decisions we make as adults about the world and children. Do we love the world enough to hold ourselves responsible for it? And, do we love our children enough to protect them from the adult world and allow them opportunities to commence something revolutionary not yet seen by us?

Although Arendt begins to close *CE* with this observation, there are no specific suggestions as to the meaningful ways teachers present the past to students. However, looking at Arendt’s broader ideas concerning the past, her understanding of tradition, and her unique positing of the pearl diver metaphor, may offer possibilities and questions for teaching and learning.

Restoring the Past by Pearl Diving

Arendt explores the past by following a “fragmentary historiography.”⁵⁵ As someone who perceives the modern world negatively, Arendt claims tradition has been shattered and can no longer respond to the modern age.⁵⁶ Consequently, tradition must be understood in fragments for it to respond to present situations.⁵⁷ To Arendt, the stakes for such an undertaking is essential for the survival of the modern world. As Passerin d’Entreves indicated concerning Arendt’s uses of the past: “To reestablish a linkage with the past is not an antiquarian exercise; on the contrary,

53. *Ibid.*, 189.

54. *Ibid.*, 191.

55. Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), x.

56. Benhabib, x.

57. Lovisa Bergdahl & Elisabet Langmann, “Time for Values: Responding Educationally to the Call from the Past,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 37, (2018), 378. <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s11217-017-9591-2.pdf>

without the critical reappropriation of the past our temporal horizon becomes disrupted, our experience precarious, and our identity more fragile”⁵⁸ But in Arendt’s mind, this means identifying the “lost potentials” of historical events and to reify them as living topics of study in our present times.⁵⁹ In other words, we must think, as Arendt argued metaphorically, “without a banister.”⁶⁰ By thinking without the guidance of traditional interpretations or categories, the person is free to make the event their own. Undoubtedly, this underscores the responsibility the teacher has for presenting the past to students since they will assist in identifying the ground upon which students find their place in the world and at the same time to, ironically, liberate the past from its tradition.

Arendt’s broader ideas concerning history or the past in the form of tradition, can be found in Arendt’s *Men in Dark Times* (1955). In the essay honoring the noted literary critic, translator, and essayist, Walter Benjamin, Arendt indicates Benjamin’s view of the past as similar to her own in “that the break in tradition and the loss of authority which occurred in his lifetime, were irreparable, and he concluded that he had to discover new ways of dealing with the past”⁶¹ Benjamin would recover past events the way a collector might, filling one’s domicile with various items representing periods in history that did not connect with each other, but resonated with the habitant and created for them something new. Similar to the revolutionary, the collector’s passion for old objects separated from their historical context, ushers in a new world that liberates the collected objects from their utility.⁶² Arendt continues by understanding the collector as a destroyer; one who gives objects unique qualities and “cleans[es] the chosen object of everything that is typical about it.”⁶³ Benjamin would conduct this activity with quotes. It should be remembered that Benjamin was a literary critic; therefore, language was an important element in his oeuvre, specifically collecting quotations. For Benjamin, quotes were not used as evidence or support for an argument. Instead, quotes were the primary work taken out of their original context and rearranged to create something new. The quotes “were able to prove their *raison d’être* in a free-floating state”⁶⁴ The focus on quotes reflected, according to Arendt, Benjamin’s method that he termed “drilling.” Drilling was about seeking out words and ideas in their isolation, separate from predetermined definitions and explanations for people to comprehend.⁶⁵

A specific quality about quotes, according to Benjamin, was that they name things. Truth, according to Benjamin, was an “acoustical phenomenon.” The act of naming presented a stronger philosophical truth than speaking. Interestingly, Benjamin believed it was Adam in *Genesis* as opposed to Plato who was the father of philosophy because he named things in the Garden of Eden.⁶⁶ Moreover, words were to be liberated from their utilitarian uses and understood as poetic utterances and linguistic fragments.⁶⁷ Based on these ideas, Arendt thinks Benjamin thought poetically. The poetic thinker is, according to Arendt, like a pearl diver who searches the ocean floor for pearls and corals that have, in their natural development, undergone deterioration; but, nonetheless are considered important because,

58. Maurizio Passerin d’Entreves, “Hannah Arendt” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford: Stanford University, 2019), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/arendt/>

59. Passerin d’Entreves.

60. Jerome Kohn, introduction to *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), xvi.

61. Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, (Orlando: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1968), 193.

62. Arendt, 197.

63. *Ibid.*, 200.

64. *Ibid.*, 202.

65. *Ibid.*, 202-203.

66. *Ibid.*, 203-204.

67. *Ibid.*, 205.

The process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization, that in the depth of the sea, into which sinks and is dissolved what was once alive, some things ‘suffer a sea-change,’ and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements, as though they waited only for the pearl diver who one day will come down to them and bring them up into the world of the living.⁶⁸

As Benjamin used quotes to express something new and meaningful, moderns recover the past by seizing the range of historical events (the pearls) to develop imaginative ideas for the future. In this way, Arendt’s thinking helps “bridge the gap between the old (tradition), and the new (change).”⁶⁹ In other words, instead of seeing the past as conflicting with the modern world, the past becomes fertile ground for new and imaginative responses to modernity and opportunities to pave the way for a better future. Similarly, teachers leverage the past as a salutary element for students’ imagination and creativity. As has been noted, Arendt argues in *CE* that education is always attentive to the past and that the teacher finds themselves mediating between past events and future developments. The way for the teacher to engage students about the past is to intentionally retrieve and examine past ideas and values that speak to students’ present situations and challenges.⁷⁰ The teacher does this by taking on the activity of the pearl diver who uncovers the remains of the past in original ways.⁷¹

Issues with the Pearl Diver

Yet, questions arise: What criteria does the teacher use to determine the treasures that are valuable enough to apply to the issues of the day? Does not the “pearl diver” have a license to decide what is valuable and what is not?⁷² These questions are decisive since the decision to choose certain treasures over others may reflect or result in dogmatic or even sinister educational plans. As Arendt indicated in *CE*, totalitarian and utopian regimes advanced their objectives by educating the children.

In order to respond to these questions, one must first understand Arendt’s ideas on the person’s relation to time, the past, and the future. For Arendt, the past is a living force; it is not something that humans must carry as a burden but a reality that they live with. Moreover, the person’s existence in relation to the past breaks the chronological development of it. The person “lives in the interval between past and future.”⁷³ This is not the present as commonly understood, but a “gap” where the person takes a stand breaking the chronology or succession of time. It is in this gap where the “beginning of a beginning”⁷⁴ can occur.

68. Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, (Orlando: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1968), 205-206.

69. Mordechai Gordon, “Introduction,” in *Hannah Arendt and Education: Renewing Our Common World*, ed. Mordechai Gordon (New York: Routledge, 2001), 5.

70. Lovisa Bergdahl, Elisabet Langmann “Time for Values: Responding Educationally to the Call from the Past,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 37, (2018), 373. <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s11217-017-9591-2.pdf>

71. Ramon Mihaila, Georghe H. Popescu, & Elvira Nica “Educational Conservatism and Democratic Citizenship in Hannah Arendt,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 48, no. 9 (2016), 923. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2015.1091283>

72. Peter Berkowitz review of *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt’s Concept of the Social*, by Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *The New Republic* (June 14, 1999): 51. <https://peterberkowitz.wordpress.com/1999/06/14/the-pearl-diver/>

73. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 10.

74. Arendt, 10.

Based on this understanding, both teachers and students exist in that gap, taking a stand and disrupting the time continuum. This, then, can be an opportunity for discussing the past educationally. When the teacher, as pearl diver, presents the past to students, there must be an understanding that the student learns from the past in relation to their existence in this gap. Hence, as opposed to studying history merely chronologically without any connection to students' present circumstances, the educational experience centers on that very connection. And as the student relates meaningfully to the past event, Arendt's insight on natality emerges. The student begins a beginning concerning something new and revolutionary.

Lovisa Bergdahl and Elisabeth Langmann touch on this idea with their work on values education. They argue for a middle way that can be achieved through Arendt's view of the past. According to Bergdahl and Langmann, educators have generally either followed a conservative approach or a critical/radical approach to teaching the past. In the conservative approach, teachers transfer the accepted values, mores, and practices of a specific culture and tradition to the next generation. The content being passed down is objectively good and worth teaching to every successive generation without concern over circumstances. An example would be the teaching of the novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. Since its publication in 1960, the novel has reached the desks of heterogeneous classrooms throughout the decades in the United States. In the critical/radical approach, teachers believe content that has been passed down is tainted by the desire of those in power to control the narrative, learning experiences, and values. Instead, teaching and learning, along with the chosen content, must look toward creating a better future as opposed to retrieving and admiring the past. Hence, classic books such as *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and many others, must be reviewed once again to determine if their value, as deemed through history, continue to resonate with today's students.

Against this backdrop, Bergdahl and Langmann see a middle path, a "Third Way" that leverages the past in more meaningful and beneficial ways. Following Arendt's thinking on the person's place between the past and future, they argue,

The fostering task of the teacher is neither to strengthen nor to break the next generations' ties with the past and the tradition, but to let children and young people remain at the threshold between past and future by critically engaging in those values that previous generations have cherished and found valuable to pass on.⁷⁵

As with Arendt's position of the person existing in the gap between the past and future, students are at the threshold and take their stand by critically exploring the so-called accepted values of a tradition. It is not conservative in that the values are not blindly accepted and seamlessly applied to the present. It is not radical in that teachers and students do not dismiss the tradition they find themselves in, but rather respect its force and influence and accept it as worthy of study.

Implementing this in lessons, requires teachers, as pearl divers, to first identify the goods and values a certain tradition holds and consider them as "contested objects of study"⁷⁶ to be explored, debated, and questioned. In making decisions concerning the topics of the past, the teacher exercises educational judgment about "which stories and values of the past are important to study

75. Lovisa Bergdahl, Elisabeth Langmann, "Time for Values: Responding Educationally to the Call from the Past," *Studies in Philosophy of Education* 37, (2018). 378. <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s11217-017-9591-2.pdf>

76. *Ibid.*, 378.

today and why.”⁷⁷ This indicates the high level of responsibility the teacher must have for lessons and curricula and the keen sense of the issues facing students today. It also speaks to why the authority of the teacher is so important to Arendt. Moreover, it places the life of the student in direct contact with the “fragmented historiography” Arendt embraces. In other words, students, as newcomers, add their voices to the fragmented layers amassed throughout history and that formulate a tradition. To apply an example from the American experience, the teacher would present the value of liberty, albeit defined and applied differently throughout the course of the country’s history, as a contested object of study. It should also be noted, however, that the value of liberty as presented by the teacher through a particular lens and tradition, may overlook or ignore other key ideas about liberty; therefore, critical exploration and inquiry based on the object is all the more necessary.⁷⁸

M.T. Korsgaard offers yet another perspective on how the teacher prudently chooses the pearls to be studied. Exploring both Benjamin’s and Arendt’s perspectives on the past, there are three criteria in choosing an event from the past (pearl) for exploration. First, the pearls cannot exclusively consist of well-known common objects of study within a tradition, (mentioned also by Bergdahl and Langmann), but also lesser-known fragments from history that have been ignored or put aside. Second, the collected pearls must have a redemptive quality to the past and a functional element to the present. The redemptive quality is taken from Walter Benjamin’s view that unless we identify pearls that save those who have gone before us, those from the past can still be unjustly treated by those in the present. Lastly, the pearls must relate with the truths and facts of history, that is to say, they must be able to reflect the whole or essence of the historical event.⁷⁹

Both Bergdahl and Langmann’s and Korsgaard’s approaches to Arendt’s educational teaching ameliorate to a degree the issues concerning the pearl diver arbitrarily choosing whatever pearl they see fit to present. However, one cannot escape the reality that teachers still may lack the prudence, proper motivation, or historical understanding, to find efficacious pearls from the past.

What would Arendt have chosen as pearls during her study of history? The answer may offer further guidance for teachers instructing as pearl divers. It is clear that Arendt’s essay on Walter Benjamin details some sense of the method she would endorse when looking for pearls from the past. To recall, the method can be understood in her analysis of Benjamin as a collector who strips the items from their utilitarian uses and historical context to make them their own. This, of course, refers to his collection of quotes and Arendt’s interpretation that Benjamin thought poetically. Although it would be problematic to strip the past event from its historical context, the pearl as representative of the historical period, is like Benjamin’s collection of quotes, made anew by being personally relatable to the student and used to building the future.

As a political theorist, Arendt came to see how the Greek polis could cast a light on today’s political activity⁸⁰ and how the American Revolution was the exemplar for political foundations.⁸¹ Arendt posits that these two examples from the past can initiate something new for the future. Dana Villa⁸² is right to point out that in the same essay on Benjamin, Arendt applies the

77. *Ibid.*, 378.

78. *Ibid.*, Langmann, 379.

79. M.T. Korsgaard, “Pearl diving and the Exemplary Way: Educational Notetaking and Taking note in Education,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 53, no. 5 (2020), 4. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1743272>

80. Korsgaard, 4.

81. Ernst Vollrath, “Hannah Arendt Views the United States,” in *Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss: German Emigres and American Political Thought After WWII*, eds. Peter Graf Kielmansegg, Horst Mewes, & Elisabeth Glaser-Schmidt. (Washington, D.C.: Cambridge University Press, 1997). 51.

82. Dana Villa, *Arendt*, (New York: Routledge, 2021).

pearl diver metaphor to the Greek polis as a model moderns can seize upon; it is “at the bottom of the sea” of political life.⁸³ The Greek polis speaks to moderns not as a historical reference to be copied, but as an active and interactive force in the political.⁸⁴ By leveraging the Greek polis this way, one recognizes its agency in the modern world.⁸⁵ The Greek polis offered a domain for individuals to engage with each other, exercising their freedom.⁸⁶ Going back to antiquity, specifically the Greek polis, would remind moderns of freedom and the importance of engaging with each other.

Could not, however, the pearls, that are lifted from the depths of the sea, actually be unrealistic or idealized views of the past event? Indeed, it has been argued that Arendt’s admiration for the Greeks’ implementation of the polis might have bordered on the romantic and quixotic.⁸⁷ But Arendt understood that the Greek polis could not be seamlessly passed on generation after generation in the modern age. In point of fact, by choosing the Greek polis as the pearl, Arendt is revivifying not its specific structure, but its commitment to the political, and in that, it possesses potential for the modern world.⁸⁸

In regard to her thinking about an authentic political community, however, Arendt chooses the American Republic. What Arendt saw uniquely in the American Founding was the practice of “founding” and “constituting;” the Founders embarked on the beginning of a new nation. To Arendt, what occurred at the American Revolution was an act of political freedom and a beginning.⁸⁹ To ensure the American Revolution becomes one of the “pearls” to study, it must be honored for its importance. In her salutary remarks on the 200th anniversary of the American Revolution, Arendt asserted that the freedom that was reflected in the American Revolution can continue to offer hope and guidance for others confronted with oppression and injustice.⁹⁰ Interestingly, this was not reminiscent of the Greek polis, which was to rule and govern, but in the Roman conception, which was to establish and preserve.⁹¹ Consequently, the American Revolution could be a catalyst for people to use to create in the modern world. Arendt also came to see that there were “lost treasures” in revolutions.⁹² Arendt’s perspectives of the Hungarian Uprising of 1956 and the Prague Spring of 1968 were examples of how revolutions were events in history that brought people together to go beyond the limits of their existence and claim their freedoms.⁹³ In essence, all three

83. Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, 204.

84. Miriam Leonard, “Hannah Arendt and the Ancients.” *Classical Philology*. 113. (2018), 4. <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/european-institute/news/2015/oct/hannak-arendt-and-ancients>

85. *Ibid.*, 4.

86. Tomas Wedine and Carl Wilen, “Ancient Equality Against Modern Democracy: Resources of Critique of Hannah Arendt and Ellen Wood.” *Distinkton: Journal of Social Theory*. 21. (2022), 26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1600910X.2019.1653347>

87. Peter Berkowitz review of *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt’s Concept of the Social*, by Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *The New Republic* (June 14, 1999): 51. <https://peterberkowitz.wordpress.com/1999/06/14/the-pearl-diver/>

88. Ernst Vollrath, “Hannah Arendt View the United States,” in *Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss: German Emigres and American Political Thought After World War II*. Eds. Peter Graf Kielmansegg, Horst Mewes, & Elisabeth Glaser-Schmidt. (Washington, D.C.: Cambridge University Press, 1997). 51.

89. Gerhard Beiser, “Hannah Arendt and the Myth of Freedom.” *Topos*. 19. (2008), 48-61. <http://journals.ehu.lt/index.php/topos/article/view/695>

90. Beiser, 53.

91. Ernst Vollrath, “Hannah Arendt View the United States,” in *Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss: German Emigres and American Political Thought After World War II*. Eds. Peter Graf Kielmansegg, Horst Mewes, & Elisabeth Glaser-Schmidt. (Washington, D.C.: Cambridge University Press, 1997). 51.

92. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006), 5.

93. Stefan Auer, “The Lost Treasure of the Revolution,” *Eurozine*, (2006). <https://www.eurozine.com/the-lost-treasure-of-the-revolution/>

examples: The Greek polis, the American Revolution, and the act of revolution are analyzed in a way where they are, “stripped” of their historical context and tradition and used to respond to future challenges and questions. For Arendt, the political could be further enhanced by the Greek polis and the American Revolution. They were two salient examples of how people could assemble, affirm themselves in a community, and exercise their freedoms. So, too, the teacher must find examples from the past that speak to students conceptually, not merely historically, and foster imaginative thoughts and creative beginnings.

It is clear as pearl diver, the teacher hunts for treasures that, according to Bergdahl and Langmann, are contested objects of study honored in particular traditions, but are nonetheless explored and critiqued for their appropriateness, meaning, and applicability in the modern world. Through rigorous discussion and critique of these values found in a tradition, newcomers engage in the quest for values in their lives. For M.T. Korsgaard, teachers choose treasures that are less obvious and known within a tradition. Teachers must choose those events that tradition or scholarship discarded or deemed unworthy of learning. Lastly, teachers need to choose treasures that represent the whole of the history being discussed; it should involve an event, story, or artifact, that details, for example, the founding of a Republic, the horrors of a mass genocide, or the liberation of a people. We may find, however, the most fruitful guidance for the teacher as pearl diver is from Arendt herself. Arendt’s acknowledgment of the uniqueness of the Greek polis and the American Founding speak to how all three can be analyzed separate from their historical place and time and inspire moderns to begin something new, to participate in natality.

Conclusion

Arendt’s ideas about natality and the uses of the past in *CE* along with her pearl diver metaphor and unique views on tradition, advises educators on ways to enhance educational experiences today. While questions still remain about the motivations and reasons teachers have in choosing past events for study and the possibility of shaping the chosen treasures to satisfy their personal ideas, goals, or desires, the ability for students, as newcomers, to innovate, imagine, and create with an eye toward the future is still a worthy and noble goal. Bergdahl and Langmann’s along with Korsgaard’s views take the best of Arendt’s educational teaching, equipping teachers with methods of instruction that makes history interesting and evocative, hopefully eliciting in students the natality Arendt argues as vital to education and a response to a decaying world. Moreover, how Arendt thinks about her own treasures of the past, namely the Greek polis and the American Revolution, may serve as a model for educators to use as they consider their own pearls in lessons and curriculum development. In the end, Hannah Arendt’s educational teaching, the metaphor of the pearl diver, and views on tradition, offer a path for teachers to plunge into the profundities of past ages, identifying the crystallized artifacts for their students, so they may set the world right.

References

- Auer, Stefan. “The Lost Treasure of the Revolution.” *Eurozine*, (October 2006). <https://www.eurozine.com/the-lost-treasure-of-the-revolution/>
- Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958
- Arendt, Hannah. *Men in Dark Times*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1968.
- Arendt, Hannah. *Between Past and Future*. New York: Penguin Classics, 2006.

- Benhabib, Seyla. *The Reluctant Modernism of Arendt*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003.
- Bergdahl, Lovisa and Langmann, Elisabet. "Time for Values: Responding Educationally to the Call from the Past." *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 37, (2018): 378. <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s11217-017-9591-2.pdf>
- Berkowitz, Peter. Review of *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social*, by Hanna Fenichel Pitkin. *The New Republic* (June 14, 1999): 44-52. <https://peterberkowitz.wordpress.com/1999/06/14/the-pearl-diver/>
- Cerbone, David R. *Heidegger: A Guide for the Perplexed*. New York: Continuum, 2008.
- Gordon, Mordechai. Introduction to *Hannah Arendt and education: Renewing our Common World*, 5. Edited by Mordechai Gordon. New York: Routledge, 2018.
- Graf Kielmansegg, Peter. Introduction to *Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss: German Emigres and American Political Thought after World War II*, 1. Edited by Peter Graf Kielmansegg, Horst Mewes, and Elisabeth Glaser-Schmidt. Washington, D.C.: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Hayden, Patrick. Introduction to *Hannah Arendt: Key Concepts*, 15. Edited by Patrick Hayden. New York: Routledge, 2014.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Basic Writings*. Edited by David F. Krell. San Francisco, Harper Collins, 1993.
- Kohn, Jerome. (1968). Introduction to *Between Past and Future*, ix. New York: Penguin Classics, 1968.
- (2001). "The World of Hannah Arendt," *Hannah Arendt Papers Online* 50, no. 3 (2001). <https://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/0103/arendt.html>.
- Lau, Grace and Ho, Kwok Keung. (2018). "Hannah Arendt's 'The Human Condition,' in the Realm of Early Childhood Education: Perceptions and Reality." *International Journal of Progressive Education* 14, no. 2 (2018): 13-28. DOI: 10.29329/ijpe.2018.139.2
- Mihaila, Ramon and Popescu, Georghe and Nica, Elvira. "Educational Conservatism and Democratic Citizenship in Hannah Arendt." *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 48, no 9 (2016): 915-927. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2015.1091283>
- d'Entreves, Maurizio Passerin. *Hannah Arendt* in The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Edited by Edward N. Zalta, 2019. <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/arendt/>>
- Rogers, Carrie. "Beginning and Becoming: Hannah Arendt's Theory of Action and Educational Action Research." *Inquiry in Education* 5, no. 1 (2014): 1-10. <http://digitalcommons.nl.edu/ie/vol5/iss1/2>
- Totsching, Wolfhart. "Arendt's Notion of Natality: An Attempt at Clarification." *Ideas y Valores*, 66, no. 165 (2017): 327-346. <http://dx.doi.org/10.15446/ideasyvalores.v66n165.55202>
- Villa, R, Dana. Introduction to *The Development of Hannah Arendt's Political Thought*, xv-xvi. Edited by Dana R. Villa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

Dr. Frank Giuseffi is an Assistant Professor of Education and Chair of Doctoral Studies at William Woods University in Fulton, Missouri. He has written and presented on instructional strategies, critical thinking, adult learning, and the philosophy of education to regional and national education organizations. Dr. Giuseffi has edited three books: *Emerging Self-Directed Learning Strategies in the Digital Age* (2018), *Self-Directed Learning Strategies in Adult Educational Contexts* (2019), and *Enhancing Teaching and Learning with Socratic Educational Strategies* (2021). He also published a book entitled, *How the Socratic Method Engenders Authentic Educational*

Experiences (2021). Dr. Giuseffi holds undergraduate degrees from the University of Central Missouri, a Master's degree in Liberal Arts from St John's College in Santa Fe, New Mexico, a Master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction from William Woods University, and a Doctorate in Education from Lindenwood University.